

Program helps diminish school violence

By Denise M. Kranski Oct. 16, 2013

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When the school year begins, it's a time rife with social stress for most students. Reputations are important to get clear right away and most kids, admittedly or not, just want to do what they can to feel comfortable and settled. For students, it's just that simple. For school administrators, however, it's never that cut and dry, and establishing an environment that feels safe for all is key.

For those administeing at Tacony Academy and First Philadelphia Preparatory Charter high schools, both run by American Paradigm Educational Management Organization, this happened in the first four days of the 2013-2014 academic school year. All of their students, grades nine through 12, spent those days engaging in an "alternatives to violence" training program.

The importance of creating a safe community was pivotal to administrators when they made this decision to bring in 70 trained adult facilitator-volunteers from the Alternatives to Violence Project instead of operating a "normal" first week. It was actually at the cornerstone of their thinking.

"[We want] our students to transform community," noted Tacony Academy Charter School's CEO, Sterling Garris. "It's not that we have violence in our school, perse," Garris continued, "but the purpose is that they learn the language to defuse situations."

Started by Quakers in 1975, AVP began as an alternative to a violence training program for prisoners so that they could learn conflict-resolution skills in order to defuse violent situations. Now, AVP is both a national and worldwide association of volunteers who offer experiential workshops in conflict resolution, responses to violence and personal growth.

At first, the high school students' reaction to this type of training was that it wasn't needed. Senior Nasir Bouldin thought it was going to be like other anti-violence programs.

"They would tell us what was going on around the world and then we would take turns talking about violence and then discuss that," Nasir said.

Similarly, senior Malina Cromartie originally didn't see much reason behind it.

"Honestly, I felt like it would be pointless and that I wouldn't take anything from it," she acknowledged.

What students didn't know in advance was that this wasn't "regular" class. They weren't going to be lectured by one adult about violence.

This program is about "getting people to a place where they can relax and drop their fronts or image or whatever barrier they put up," noted Dr. Carolyn Schodt, coordinator of the Philadelphia chapter of AVP.

"A larger whole is that no one is wrong about how they feel. You might choose your judgment or your attitude but you can't make up your feelings," Schodt continued. "If you are becoming more aware of your feelings, that's a truthful place."

And that is just what Malina ended up experiencing.

"I realized that everyone has what they go through and you really can't judge someone by how they look," she said.

Malina found out personal information about her classmates that she had never known.

"I was like, 'I have known you for four years and I never knew that,' " she said.

The trainings were interspersed with team-building exercises, personal share-outs and discussions about various ways to respond.

"We had examples on the board about how to better verbally handle situations," noted senior Chris McGregor, a new student to TCA, who was referred to as "Classic Chris" during the trainings.

Chris actually acknowledged that after the training, he hasn't been mad at all.

"I have actually stopped and [thought] about stuff," he said.

One of the things that has helped students like Chris is the introduction to conversation-starter options, like: I feel (insert emotion) when you say (insert word) because it makes me feel (insert reaction). He has seen his classmates put this phrasing into action a lot since the training session.

"My classmates actually kept those skills that we learned," an impressed Chris notes.

Senior Robert Marenbach not only benefited from these training sessions, he has made major changes in his own behavior.

"Just the other day, a teacher called on me and I turned around and responded with, 'What?,' because I hadn't fully heard her," he said.

Rather than argue, Robert's normal reaction, he immediately apologized to her.

"I don't want to be arguing with teachers this year," Robert thoughtfully responded. "I feel like I think about it a little bit more now that I went through the training."

Student responses like Marenbach's are indicative of what this training is all about.

“[AVP] is following a dream of Martin Luther King Jr., who spoke about starting a non-violent movement based on a community where all people feel safe,” Schodt noted. “These students are going to become peaceful, grounded leaders. Like dropping a rock in the pond and the circles go out.”

Whether it is in the halls of Tacony Academy or First Philadelphia, the streets of Lawncrest, where both schools are located, the larger Philadelphia area or beyond, because of this training, students can begin to practice peaceful communication in order to make both themselves and others feel safe.

“There is no one who can convince me that anyone wants to feel unsafe,” noted Stacey Cruise, CEO of American Paradigm Schools. “This is what AVP is all about.” ••